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ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

Smt. Nayantara Sahgal

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SIG. (Nayantara Sahgal)

DATE July 5, 1968

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH NAYANTARA SAHGAL

Recorded on May 24, 1968
in New Delhi

Interviewer: Mrs. Sahgal could you tell us something about your earliest memories of Allahabad?

Smt. Sahgal: My earliest memories are not of Anand Bhavan but of our own house on Kanpur Road in Allahabad where my parents lived. My father was a barrister and he was still practising. This was before he gave up his practice. We lived there but ours lives were closely linked with Anand Bhavan because we used to go there very often. The three of us children would go there for lunch with our grandmother and others. Mamu was a frequent visitor whenever he was in Allahabad. So, in Allahabad our family lived very close to Anand Bhavan. We used to visit that house very often.

Interviewer: What are your earliest memories of your grandfather?

Smt. Sahgal: Not my grand-father. I hardly have any memories of him, as I was only 3 when he died. I have a very clear recollection of my grand-mother and her sister, Bibi Amma.

Interviewer: Pandit Motilal Nehru died in 1931; then you were only three. So your childhood memories would cover the period 1931-36, just before your mother became a Minister in the U.P. Government.

Smt. Sahgal: Health Minister. That is right.

Interviewer: Can you tell us something about how your father and your uncle discussed politics when they got together in your house?

Smt. Sahgal: Well, they didn't. There was not a great deal of discussion of politics, in fact. We never thought of it as politics but of living in a particular way. In fact it was not until I went to America as a college student - years later - that I realised that politics was something different from ordinary living, that it was a subject which could be studied objectively.

Interviewer: It was woven into the texture of your life.

Smt. Sahgal: Absolutely. It was like the food we ate. I say food because we bought nothing foreign. Nothing came out of tins and jars. Everything was home-made or home-grown. There was a sort of pride about that. The clothes we wore were all Khadi. The manner of travel was third class because Gandhiji had decried travel by any higher-class. So, all of us travelled by third-class.

Interviewer: It must have been very, very hard.

Smt. Sahgal: Well, it was a way of life.

Interviewer: How far is this place Khali?

Smt. Sahgal: Khali is 9 miles beyond Almora, which, as you know, is a hill station in U.P. It is reached by train first upto Kathgodam and then we had to go by car. I cannot tell you how many miles it is from Allahabad. But it is like Naini Tal and Almora - in that region.

Interviewer: You visited Khali every summer.

Smt. Sahgal: We went there nearly every summer. The last time we visited that place was in 1942. In 1942 after the 'Quit India' Movement started, my parents were imprisoned. My father died as a result of his last imprisonment. It [estate] was sold I think in 1949, because my mother, after his death, started her career in the diplomatic service abroad.

Interviewer: Was it a beautiful house and a very big estate?

Smt. Sahgal: The estate was very big. The house itself was not big. It was a typical, friendly, wooden house of the kind built by Englishmen in hill stations. The house was bought from an Englishman.

Interviewer: Was there a garden?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, there was a garden. There were orchards - peaches, apricot - it was quite a big estate.

Interviewer: That is where Mr. Pandit did most of his writing?

Smt. Sahgal: No, no. His writing was done mostly in jails. He did his "Mudrarakshas" in jail; "Ritusamhar" as well. The "Rajatarangini" was written much earlier; not in jail; it was published, I believe, in 1933.

Interviewer: What was his pre-occupation at Khali? Gardening, I suppose.

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, there was Gardening. But, there was more to it than that. He was interested in making the estate pay for itself. He set up a tannery; he put up a poultry farm and a school for the hill people's children and things of that kind. He wanted to see if he could can fruit. But he was so involved in politics that he could not really devote much time to anything else. His Khali ventures suffered because of that.

Interviewer: Did he do a lot of touring?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, as Secretary to the party and as part of the party's programme, he did a great deal of touring.

Interviewer: You know when I saw him first?

Smt. Sahgal: Oh, you have met him!

Interviewer: I saw him but I did not meet him. I was a small boy. It was in 1930 (1931 ?) or so that I saw him, when I was 13 years old.

Smt. Sahgal: Where was it?

Interviewer: It was in Rawalpindi when he came as Secretary of the Patel Enquiry Committee. There was some firing in Peshawar; some Pathan agitation was there. The Congress appointed an Enquiry Committee headed by Vithalbhai Patel, the Speaker of the Assembly and your father was the Secretary of that Committee. He came there and I remember the room where they were holding the enquiry. I went there once and my memory of your father is of a very handsome man in spotless white. Apart from his own books, it seems to me that his fascinating personality has not come out well

enough in references about him.

Smt. Sahgal: That is true. He was very much submerged by so many things. He was not a politican by choice, but he was not just a scholar either. He was an extraordinary combination of politics and many other things.

Interviewer: He was a kind of renaissance figure.....

Smt. Sahgal: Exactly.

Interviewer: It was very unusual in India. He was like a European of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Smt. Sahgal: My own memory of him is that he was not just a bookish scholar. He was very gay and he loved music and laughter.

Interviewer: Was his entering into politics in 1921 almost instantaneous after his marriage?

Smt. Sahgal: Actually he was drawn into politics before his marriage. In fact, I do not know whether my mother has shown you any of the private letters written between her and my father during their engagement. They are so lovely and they reflect the whole atmosphere of the Non-Cooperation Movement and Satyagraha. They are a sort of a focus on the political life of the times, and show how the young were deeply attracted by it. He was one of them. For him it was a sort of a beacon-light and he wrote with great enthusiasm as to what it would mean to them as husband and wife, what it was going to mean to them as a family.

Interviewer: He was greatly attracted to Gandhiji even before that time? He knew him.

Smt. Sahgal: His family knew Gandhiji extremely well. My grandfather, Sitaram Pandit, was one of the foremost lawyers in that part of the country, Rajkot, and Gandhiji used to visit his house. He used to come to my grandfather's house in his frock-coat and top hat. It was before he had given all that up. So, they were known to each other, the two families, but not in any sort of capacity other than ordinary friendliness. Gandhiji was a young man at that time and he had not yet become a leader. My father's

family was quite disapproving of my father's interest in politics. They did not want him to throw away a good lucrative career and join that 'crazy' man. They did not at all approve of the idea.

Interviewer: You think he was inclined that way even before his marriage.

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, very much so. It attracted his imagination very strongly.

Interviewer: There is the other case of your aunt in Bombay. Her husband did not enter politics in the same way as your father did.

Smt. Sahgal: No.

Interviewer: So, her life became different.

Smt. Sahgal: Completely. I think she deliberately chose that and remained out of it.

Interviewer: The husband's attitude to a situation like this would be crucial. Is it not so?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, it would be.

Interviewer: If for example, your father had not chosen Allahabad, but, instead, stayed on at Calcutta, things would have been quite different?

Smt. Sahgal: Quite different. In fact he had quite broken away from his past and in that process I think he submerged a great deal of himself.

Interviewer: Was it not your grandfather who said that he should stay at Allahabad?

Smt. Sahgal: That would not have made any difference. He felt strongly stirred himself and he was completely enchanted by the political atmosphere generated by Gandhiji and my mother's family's absorption in the whole thing. It was not my grandfather's wish ~~to~~ that was responsible for his settling at Allahabad.

Interviewer: Panditji's friendship with your father - was it slow to grow?

Smt. Sahgal: Well, as a matter of fact, before he married Mummy, he had written an article, I think, for a magazine called 'The Modern Review' entitled "At the Feet of the Guru". He wrote about Mamu. That was the beginning of a very strong bond of comradeship between them which grew in later life, because they did the same work.

Interviewer: They had some imprisonments together?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, they had. I remember once when they were in prison together in Dehra Dun in 1940. Mummy brought me down from school in Mussoorie and we went to visit them. My father was working on one of his books. I forget which one it was and my uncle was then talking of what should be done with Anand Bhavan. This was a perennial theme with him. He used to discuss it with Mummy at great length and with some yearning. He used to say he wanted to hear the laughter of children in the house. My cousin was not then married. This was in 1940.

Interviewer: Do you remember any stories which your father might have told you about those imprisonment days?

Smt. Sahgal: Nothing specific. I remember I visited them in 1940. Mamu was always ~~was~~ alive to his surroundings. If there were cats and dogs about he befriended them and each assumed a sort of history for him. He introduced them to us with great detail. I remember another thing. He had put some pebbles in his soap dish. He asked me, "Why have I put these pebbles here?" I blinked, and couldn't think of a reason. Then he said, "Why, you fathead! Why should I put them there except to save the soap - stop it from melting!" He was always full of little quirks and jokes like that.

Interviewer: I suppose you had more than your share of him? You and your sisters had enough opportunities to play with him?

Smt. Sahgal: We never had enough of him. He was more than a favourite; he was the finest human being we knew. Apart from the kind of hilarious nonsense that we indulged in with him like

standing on our heads when grown-ups were present, he was such good company. He talked to each one of us with such affection and friendliness. He was terribly interested in what one was doing, what one was reading, how one was getting on at school. He tried to guide us even from jail. I think I have those letters with me still in which he tells me exactly where certain books in the library are to be found - on such and such a shelf, on such and such a side, 'you must read these books because I know they will interest you'. He was always taking part in one's growing up.

Interviewer: He took you seriously, even as a child?

Smt. Sahgal: He took me as a person, whether young or old. I was a complete person to him.

Interviewer: One of the things which grown-ups do is that they do not take the young ones seriously.

Smt. Sahgal: Particularly, in India, where people do not look at a person until his hair is grey.

Interviewer: Gandhiji used to stay in Anand Bhavan whenever he visited Allahabad. Do you remember any visit?

Smt. Sahgal: Very well. I remember extremely well when he visited Allahabad in 1940 for the foundation-stone laying function of the Kamala Nehru hospital. Mamu, I believe, was not there. He was in jail. There was a great big gathering and Mrs. Naidu was present and Padmaja-masi also. I used to take his garlic to Gandhiji. You know he had a particular diet and he used to eat raw garlic. I used to carry it at arms length detesting its strong smell. Mrs. Naidu saw me and said, "There is no need to be so snooty, young lady. If you want to have a complexion like the old man's when you're his age, you'd do well to eat some of it yourself!"

Interviewer: Your mother became a Minister in 1937 July?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes.

Interviewer: Were you there at that time?

Smt. Sahgal: We were at school in Woodstock up in Mussoorie. But, during the holidays we had taken part in a very hectic election campaign for her.

Interviewer: That is very interesting.

Smt. Sahgal: Papu, our father stood from Jamna-par, and she from Kanpur. Throughout the holidays we were involved in the excitement of their election campaigns. In fact Mamu's valet Hari also stood for election. I think we were even more excited about his campaign!

Interviewer: That was more to ridicule the Constitution!

Smt. Sahgal: It was certainly a milestone, I think.

Interviewer: I mean Hari being put up as a candidate.

Smt. Sahgal: Yes. I suppose, it was, as you say, a joke of its kind. But that was because he did not make use of it. I feel, any one who had made use of the opportunities he was given, would have gone far in life.

Interviewer: I interviewed him once. He did not strike me as very intelligent.

Smt. Sahgal: It was not a question of being unintelligent. I think he was dishonest.

Interviewer: He went to the dogs!

Smt. Sahgal: Absolutely, and he never returned the trust and affection that were reposed in him. He had such tremendous opportunities to rise. People with half his opportunities to-day make much better use of them, get somewhere, do something with the chance given to them, but he never did. He was just incapable of it. His election turned out to be a ridicule of the Constitution. But it needn't have been. His was a very sad case.

Interviewer: Still he remained with Panditji till he died.

Smt. Sahgal: I know. Mamu never sacked him because the family made the mistake of never telling him what Hari was upto. I do

not think Mamu knew of his misdeeds.

Interviewer: How did such a thing happen? This is very interesting. I am not talking about you, but the attitude of the family was, I suppose, why bother him when he has so many other things to worry about.

Smt. Sahgal: It was always to protect him. But, when I had a problem I used to take it to him and he responded immediately. I felt that the family cut him off from everyday matters with too much protection. Mamu must not know this; let him not know that. There was too much protection. Mamu should not be disturbed; he has his big speech tomorrow; that long journey the day after. On account of this intense protective feeling, he was not told many things. In fact, when I grew older, I went to him invariably with my personal problems; and certainly in any crisis, I used to run to him. Talking to him gave me strength.

Interviewer: If people had been frank, certain difficulties could have been avoided.

Smt. Sahgal: Indeed they could have been. I don't think people came out enough with him, they used to be reticent before him with the intention of saving him any extra burden - I mean including his political colleagues, people working with him, ambassadors and others whom he had to trust. They were not free with him. They wanted to save him the extra burden.

Interviewer: Perhaps with the idea of saving themselves!

Smt. Sahgal: Very much so.

Interviewer: If you say something unpalatable to a person in authority at a particular time his anger may be visited on you. But it is better to put up with that anger.......

Smt. Sahgal: Only a very few, a handful of human beings have the capacity to face the truth. Mamu had that capacity. He would have faced the truth. But he was not given the truth. I feel our China misadventure was because of that. He misjudged the situation and nobody reported the truth to him. The same thing happened in his domestic life also. In the case of Hari, everything

was hidden from Mamu. Hari was not an honest man, he was doing all sorts of things - buying and selling whisky among other things.

Interviewer: I think you have mentioned about this, that he got drunk or misbehaved, in your book.

Smt. Sahgal: I don't think I have. But certainly he did not behave properly. As long ago as 1950 I felt that he was not a person to be kept in such close contact with Mamu. Someone else had to be trained, which was what in fact was done after Hari died. But the family disagreed with me and said that Mamu must be spared this and that.

Interviewer: Do you remember anything in regard to the "Quit India" Movement?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, a great deal. That was the first time I was old enough to take an active part. We, the students of Allahabad, were to take out two huge processions and they were to converge at a particular point in the city. My sisters and I took part in one of these. It was a very thrilling and rather terrifying experience, because the streets had been barricaded by the Police and we were stopped and there was firing. It was my first real collision with authority; it was very stirring and exciting.

Interviewer: A time came when your mother was in jail; your father was in jail; and Mamu was in jail. Only the children were left behind.

Smt. Sahgal: Mummy and Papu had anticipated this movement, as they did every time, and they made arrangements for this also. Before he was arrested, my father had interviewed a governess in Bombay. He happened to be in Bombay as the August meetings were held there. He had interviewed a Chinese woman and sent her to us as governess. My elder sister went to jail. It was only myself and my younger sister who were with this Chinese governess, until 1943 when I went to America with my elder sister.

Interviewer: In Woodstock, did you continue to wear Khadi?

Smt. Sahgal: In Woodstock there was no uniform. One wore one's

usual clothes. We wore our own usual clothes. I resented it very much because I wanted to be like other children and I disliked khadi very much at the time.

Interviewer: I wonder if you know a story which I have learnt about the first experience of Khadi in your family. It was in 1920 and all the women were dressed in Khadi. Khadi used to be more coarse then.

Smt. Sahgal: Not what it is today!

Interviewer: Nothing like it, either in colour or texture; nothing to commend itself. Your grandfather was sitting there in the courtyard in Anand Bhavan; your grandmother, Nanima, came dressed in Khadi and asked him, "How do I look?" He asked, "Shall I tell the truth?" She said, "Yes, of course!" And he said, "You look like a bhangan, a sweepress!" That was what Khadi was in those days. Panditji of course, described it as the "livery of freedom" and everybody wore it........

The next important phase starts when you went to the States.

Smt. Sahgal: We had to leave India because my elder sister, Chandralekha, was required by the University to give an undertaking that she would not take part in any political activities on her release from prison. Of course, she was not prepared to do that. So it became impossible for her to join any institution in India. Britain was having the blitz at the time; otherwise she would have gone to Oxford. At that time the Chiang Kai-Sheks were great friends of our family and Madam Chiang Kai-Shek had just established the May - Ling - Soong scholarship for Asian students at Wellesley, her old alma mater. My sister became the first May - Ling - Soong scholar and I went along as a special case, because I could not be left behind and I had to go to College somewhere. That is how we happened to go to America.

Interviewer: Your father at that time was in prison. He was released in 1943.

Smt. Sahgal: He came out towards the end of 1943 and he died in

January 1944.

Interviewer: When he died you were in the States?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes.

Interviewer: Was it the strain of prison life?

Smt. Sahgal: He got a bad attack of pleurisy. He was given treatment in the prison by the prison doctors but he was not allowed his own medical attendants. By the time he was released, he was too ill to benefit by any treatment.

Interviewer: That was very, very tragic. It could have been avoided.

Smt. Sahgal: He was a man of such radiant health and vitality and a man who worshipped health and the out-door life. That such a man suffered a slow deterioration of his health as a result of detention and the kind of life he was forced to live there, was really tragic. His last prison sentence completely finished anything he had by way of health.

Interviewer: You returned to India in 1947.

Smt. Sahgal: My sister came earlier in 1946. I came after 4 years at college, in 1947.

Interviewer: You saw the U.N. coming into existence. Your mother led the Indian Delegation. There was a good deal of excitement. Our political aspirations were made known in the world forum. Do you recall anything interesting during that period?

Smt. Sahgal: To begin with, she led the first unofficial delegation to the first session of the U.N. which was held in 1945 in San Francisco immediately after the War. The official delegation consisted of Feroze Khan Noon and some others. I forget the other names. She was the leader of the un-official Indian delegation.

Interviewer: There were some demonstrations and ....

Smt. Sahgal: She went there in order to harry the official Indian Delegation and to give to the American Press and public whatever

she could by way of the truth about Indian national aspirations.

Interviewer: It was quite obvious that people in America did not expect that big things were going to happen shortly.

Smt. Sahgal: No, neither did we at that time. We could not imagine that things were going to change so quickly.

Interviewer: Otherwise the Government of India would not have behaved in such an obtuse manner.

Smt. Sahgal: I think so.

Interviewer: And the Indians themselves were not more optimistic.

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, nobody really knew. I think the British themselves did not realise with what rapidity things were going to develop.

Interviewer: Looking back, did you really imagine the British were going for good?

Smt. Sahgal: I could not have imagined, not in one's own life time. That is how I took it. One does not imagine that very important things are going to happen in one's own life time.

Interviewer: So, in 1946, you still felt that you were a crusader - in a small way - for freedom?

Smt. Sahgal: In 1946? No. Because by the middle or so of 1946 the interim Government had come in.

Interviewer: Yes, the crucial months were the end of 1945. Even when the British Parliamentary delegation came to India some thought that it was more eye-wash.

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, another hoax.

Interviewer: It was when the Cabinet Mission came that things became obvious.

Smt. Sahgal: By the time our delegation to the United Nations x was sent in 1946, there was the feeling that something was happening, because this was the first time that a delegation was sent

out of India by an Indian Government. And just after that my mother was appointed Ambassador to Moscow. I think she went there in August 1947.

Interviewer: Did you spend some time in Moscow?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, six months in 1948.

Interviewer: Any memories of that time?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, very clear but very drab, because Moscow was so completely battered by the war. There was nothing to eat, nothing to look at. Even in the grocery shops, there were card-board loaves of bread, card-board sausages and the whole outlook was so bleak. People were very shabbily dressed.

Interviewer: Did they seem to be interested in India?

Smt. Sahgal: There was a kind of worked-up interest taken in my mother. Whenever she went to the opera or the ballet people saw her and clapped, and so on. Otherwise, not much. She was not given even an interview by Stalin. It was very much the Stalinist era at that time.

Interviewer: Did she travel outside?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, a little but under supervision. We did go to Leningrad. At least while I was there, I don't think she did more than that. Without permission we could not go beyond 50 kilometres outside Moscow.

Interviewer: I think for some time you stayed in the York Road house.

Smt. Sahgal: 17, York Road? Yes.

Interviewer: And those were the months when the whole country was convulsed by the effects of partition.

Smt. Sahgal: I came back from college in October 1947 and I stayed there with Mamu. Even now every time I pass by that house, I am haunted by the things I saw and heard there. Every inch of the ground was covered with tents housing refugees and police.

The verandahs over-flowed with refugees. And then there was the Kashmir invasion and Sheikh Abdullah and his family were flown down to Delhi. They lived with us. It was a small house and they were given a couple of bed-rooms. Mamu and I slept on the veranadah.

Interviewer: Who were these refugees?

Smt. Sahgal: Oh, the refugees from the Punjab. They just came in. They had nowhere else to go. There was utter chaos and absolute, sheer confusion. I had just then returned from the dazzle and glamour of America and I found it all bewildering: the smell and sweat of suffering people packed very close to each other.

Interviewer: And he was facing a very grave crisis in the Government under such circumstances?

Smt. Sahgal: In the country. It was a very grave situation in the country. These were the conditions under which he was living.

Interviewer: That must have been really very trying.

Smt. Sahgal: In a sense, of course, he was always in a melee. Even in Anand Bhavan there were no fixed meal times. Visitors would come all the time and they would be asked to join in. He had no privacy even in Anand Bhavan.

Interviewer: Always or on occasions?

Smt. Sahgal: Well, not always, but whenever he came there was a kind of a mela. He was constantly under a strain.

Interviewer: About the happenings of 1947, did he talk to you about them?

Smt. Sahgal: No, he did not. You know, the curious thing about him was that the thing that was very much on his mind, he would not mention. Just at that time Gandhiji went on that terrible fast and there were murders in Delhi, and so on. During that time Mamu was tremendously preoccupied with all these things. And, you know, one night when Dr. Syed Hossain came for dinner he did not

discuss it at all; they talked about so many other things like Swinburne and Mamu's college days. At that time I said to myself "Well, isn't wonderful that he can get away from all his pre-occupations so easily!"

Interviewer: That would mean that he would not normally talk of things which were worrying him. He wanted a change; he wanted to forget.

Smt. Sahgal: I think if he had had a wife, he could have brought his worries home. But he had no one to whom he could bring his worries.

Interviewer: Were you here when Gandhiji was shot?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes. We, Uncle Syed, Indi and I, were having tea at 17, York Road. We heard some kind of an explosive noise. But you know a couple of days earlier also there had been an explosion. So we thought that nothing had happened, nothing serious. But then this message came through and we rushed over to Birla House immediately. He was just breathing his last at the time.

Interviewer: I think Panditji was very deeply wounded, that it should have happened when he was the Prime Minister, that anybody should have shot Gandhiji.

Smt. Sahgal: Well, if someone whom you loved, whom you believed immortal died suddenly, without a word, without a message, without saying goodbye.......it was a great shock to him. I think he rose to some of his greatest heights on that occasion. I was in Delhi until March '48 when I went to Moscow and stayed there for xix six months. By that time Mamu had moved to this building here, the Prime Minister's House.

Interviewer: You did visit this place from time to time, didn't you?

Smt. Sahgal: Oh, yes! Delhi was like a second home to me until he died. I came here certainly once a year in the winter with the children. And in between whenever I could possibly manage it, I would come at least for a few days. Because just to be with him in the same house and to see him at breakfast was somehow very

re-assuring. He had the effect of resolving contradictions, when one is full of confusion in one's own mind - the home, various kinds of crises, problems. When one came here somehow everything fell into place.

Interviewer: He was fond of your children.

Smt. Sahgal: He was wonderful with them. My son, I am afraid, used to write to him asking for all sorts of things - orange squash, ham, this and that, to be sent to school, which he very sweetly did send.

Interviewer: I suppose you were the only niece who was writing and that must have given him great pleasure. I think he loved writing.

Smt. Sahgal: Actually he did really like my writing. In fact my only regret is that I did so little work while he lived. I was busy bringing up the children and, you know, the home and everything else that keeps a woman busy. I would have liked to have done much more work and talked about it much more with him. I really got to do a great deal of writing only after he died.

Interviewer: Did he enjoy the books which you wrote before that?

Smt. Sahgal: No, he did not enjoy everything I wrote. He enjoyed the first one - Prison and Chocolate Cake. The second - it was a novel - 'A Time To Be Happy,' he said that it was boring and he could not get going with it; it was very slow.

Interviewer: Did he read a lot of fiction?

Smt. Sahgal: Not a great deal. In fact, he did not have very much time. But he did take a couple of books with him wherever he went, even when he went to Chakrata or Dehra Dun for two or three days.

Interviewer: I left my script with him, THE NEHRUS, on 6th May, 1961. He told me in September that he had read it and he apologised for the delay saying that it had been with him at his bedside, but he could not find the time to read it.

Smt. Sahgal: He had very little time. But he was very conscious

of books.

Interviewer: It was very interesting that he pointed out three or four corrections. One was a French word that was mis-spelt. In another place a date was wrong. I mean to say, only a person who had done detailed reading could have pointed out those things.

Smt. Sahgal: Yes. That is true. Once he sent me to Darjeeling to prepare a manuscript about Tenzing after he had climbed Everest. I went there and got a very quick rough draft ready to show to him when I returned. A few days later I was to leave for Bombay he asked me to come over. For the first time I sat on the other side of the desk facing him and I felt I was dealing with the boss. He pointed out two or three things which could not possibly have struck him if he had not made a detailed and careful reading. He did not say the usual things. But he pointed out two or three particular things. What about this paragraph? It has been oddly put. How about this sentence? He just picked them out.

Interviewer: There was a paragraph in one chapter of the book, The Nehrus, where I had tried to describe how his life could have been, or, would have been, if he had joined the Civil Service - just a little bit, an imaginative paragraph, not meant seriously. But I had tried to be exact. I knew that he played bridge. So I mentioned it. Then I had said that on Sunday mornings he would have played a game of golf. He said that he had never played golf. ~~He said that he had never played golf.~~ When I tried to persist, he said, "No, no! You must strike it out." In fact, I was pleased that he had accepted the other things as right. In a couple of other cases, I knew that in printed books there was a question mark where there were some mistakes. But I believe he was a very fast reader.

Smt. Sahgal: He was very conscious of books as such. This feeling for books came out on all sorts of occasions. There was a lift here in this house. I think it is still here. It was installed at the time when the doctors insisted that he should not be running up and down the stairs. One day I got stuck in that for 1¾ hours. I was really frantic and there was no outlet at all. There was just a little glassed-in port type of arrangement. He

was talking to me through the glass and I could hardly hear him because of the glass. I had pressed the alarm and there was a great deal of activity and agitation outside and they were trying to get the lift working. Mamu was trying to reassure me through the glass window. It took 1½ hours to get the lift moving. When I came out Mamu told me, "We must keep some interesting books in that lift. There should be something nice to read if anyone gets stuck in it!" He was talking for the benefit of any future victim and in fact a couple of books were put in there. One was a book by Steinbeck. The Reign of Pipin IV or something like that.

Interviewer: He was fond of poetry, wasn't he?

Smt. Sahgal: He was extremely fond of poetry.

Interviewer: Did he write any poetry?

Smt. Sahgal: No. Not to my knowledge. I wrote one poem for him. He was very touched and very sweet about it. He really appreciated and loved poetry.

Interviewer: Did he recite any poems in your presence occasionally?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, quite a bit.

Interviewer: Who were his favourite poets?

Smt. Sahgal: The ones I heard him recite were ....Swinburne. "These many years since we began to be ...." Then Yeats. I cannot off hand remember any others. He loved Shelley. When I was a little girl, he asked me to read Andre Maurois' biography of Shelley.

Interviewer: Now, we come to the period when you were visiting him in Delhi during the 'fifties and the early 'sixties. Where were you when the Chinese invasion took place?

Smt. Sahgal: In Bombay.

Interviewer: Soon afterwards did he come to Bombay?

Smt. Sahgal: No, he did not come. The invasion took place in October 1962 and I came to Delhi in December. I used to do that every year, come here when the schools closed, stop here for a fortnight and then go to Chandigarh.

Interviewer: Did you notice - as some people have said - that the Chinese invasion seemed to have taken a lot out of him.

Smt. Sahgal: It not only took a lot out of him, but it killed him. I don't think one noticed it at that time. He had to fight a battle over Krishna Menon. The collapse came a little bit later.

Interviewer: He had to fight two battles - one with the Chinese and the other to keep the people together.

Smt. Sahgal: There was a third battle which he was fighting with himself. That was the most heart-breaking. If any man worshipped the culture of China - you cannot use the word worship so easily while talking of Mamu............

Interviewer: His books show that.

Smt. Sahgal: His books show that, yes. His intense love and admiration for what the Chinese stood for ....

Interviewer: China before 1949?

Smt. Sahgal: No! He always felt that there was no break. Even 1949 was the outcome of a natural development of China.

Interviewer: But the Chinese themselves wanted to break with the past, so that they could have regimentation for certain purposes. It was not a continuation of China's culture, which he had admired and written about.

Smt. Sahgal: In his view it was a continuation of the people. He always distinguished between the Chinese form of communism and the Russian form of Communism, the European form. He never suspected that in China there could be this kind of development.

Interviewer: Like the German culture which endures and continues, though different regimes may come and go. In the same manner, it

may be, that some of us would have said that the background of Chinese culture and that kind of idealism, was something very basic to the life and being of the Chinese people.

Smt. Sahgal: I do not really think that the word 'idealism' applies to China. They are essentially practical. They are in the middle of the road. That is why Mamu always thought that they would be in the middle of the road in any political situation that prevailed then.

Interviewer: He was betrayed by them.

Smt. Sahgal: Mamu really felt the Chinese understood 'Panch Sheel' and that kind of thing.

Interviewer: Did he talk about China in 1962 when you came here?

Smt. Sahgal: No. At least not to me.

Interviewer: I think his health went down between the beginning of 1963 and 1964. Even before his Bhubaneshwar attack. But he did not slow down in his work.

Smt. Sahgal: He did slow down in one respect. He used to work literally till all hours of the night. Any time that suited him. After that 1962 attack he did set for himself a sort of dead-line. He stopped at midnight. Whenever I was in Delhi I used to get up at midnight and go to his office and tell him that it was midnight. And he used to say 'Yes, darling. I am coming.' And he would come. To that extent he did slow down.

Interviewer: Before that?

Smt. Sahgal: He would work for long hours.

Interviewer: Till when? Two O'Clock? or even later?

Smt. Sahgal: Yes, sometimes. But not always. It depended on the work in hand. Take for example the Goa take-over. He was in a state of high tension, pacing up and down the corridor.

Interviewer: Looking at it in historical perspective the Goa take-over was the simplest thing and the Prime Minister need not

have batted an eye-lid.

Smt. Sahgal: In fact, it was one of our mistakes that we did so much. It was not necessary at all.

Interviewer: Then he visited Bombay a few days before his death.

Smt. Sahgal: That is right. He visited just a few days before his death.

Interviewer: It was a very crowded programme for him even then.

Smt. Sahgal: It was crowded. But by that time everybody had begun to wonder how long he would last. It was harrowing to look at his face.

Interviewer: Maybe, after his attack in January 1964 he started working too soon. He didn't take sufficient care of himself.

Smt. Sahgal: No. I think he took care. You know although people have always said that he did not take care of himself, he took great care of himself. He was very meticulous about his morning exercises. He always observed all the little things like gargling and other items of daily routine. The food he ate was not much, he ate in moderation, but it was wholesome. He ate fruit; he ate porridge in the morning and he never skipped a meal.

Interviewer: He was regular in his habits.

Smt. Sahgal: Absolutely. The only thing he was not regular about till the doctors clamped down on him was rest. Then it was too late. The machine had run down.

Interviewer: Or looking at it from another angle - no one is immortal. Maybe even if he had been more careful he would have died at the same age.

Smt. Sahgal: That is conceivable.

Interviewer: But till 1962 he gave the impression of inexhaustible energy.

Smt. Sahgal: Yes. That is so.

Interviewer: Well, thank you very much.